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URBAN PARKS: Constraints on Park Visitation

Recreation research shows that there are marked inequalities among population groups in terms of their participation in different leisure activities and their use of local, regional and national park and recreation services. Those who do not visit parks often tend to be female, older, members of a minority group, and have lower levels of education and income. Understanding why people do not make greater use of the parks and recreation services communities provide can help managers overcome the problem.

Leisure constraints are those factors that limit people's participation in or enjoyment of leisure activities and services (e.g., parks and programs). There are several types of constraints.

Lack of Interest and Skills

Early studies focused primarily on factors that are physical and external to the individual, such as disabilities or lack of facilities. But there are also intrapersonal constraints, which have to do with people's personality needs, prior socialization and perceived abilities. These constraints inhibit the development of leisure preferences. People who lack interest, skills, confidence and information about

leisure activities are unlikely to participate in such activities or to visit parks.

Some constraints are interpersonal in nature. Studies have shown that members of ethnic and racial minority groups often do not visit parks because they are afraid of being harassed or assaulted by Anglo visitors and law enforcement officers. This suggests that merely providing people with easy access to parks and outdoor recreation areas may not cause them to participate unless there is a simultaneous effort to promote positive attitudes about the outdoors, help people develop their skills, and ensure visitor safety (Crawford and Godbey).

Lack of Time

Lack of time is the reason North Americans most often give for not visiting local parks. Family and work commitments leave little time for leisure, and there are many activities and experiences competing for people's leisure time. Recreation and park providers must understand that they are in competition for people's free time (Scott).

Constraints to Beginning and Continuing Leisure Activities

Various constraints may be more or less important depending on whether the goal is to explain why people stop participating in a

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leisure activity or to explain why they never participate in the first place. For example, the cost of equipment and parental disapproval are important reasons why some young people never try a new leisure activity. But program-related factors (e.g., unhappiness with leaders and rules) and lack of skills are reasons they may stop participating.

Constraints Vary by Population Groups

People with low incomes are most likely to cite lack of access, lack of transportation, fear of crime, and the cost of equipment as reasons they do not participate in leisure activities. Individuals with high incomes are more likely to cite lack of time as a barrier. Some constraints are particularly problematic for specific segments of the population. The following examples are illustrative:

- Some women and girls have a **negative body image**. If they feel self-conscious about the way they look they may be reluctant to participate in certain activities, such as swimming (James).
- Many people with disabilities are constrained by **learned helplessness**, or the lack of motivation to develop strategies for taking control of their lives. Thus, helplessness prevents individuals from developing the skills and motivation to visit parks or try leisure activities (Dattilo).
- Older adults may feel very limited by **age-related norms**, or the idea that participating in sports and physical activities is the privilege of younger people (McPherson).

Overcoming Constraints

Many people participate in leisure activities despite the constraints they may encounter by using strategies, individually or collectively, to overcome them (Jackson). Highly motivated individuals often work very hard in order to participate in leisure activities or visit parks. People's ability to overcome constraints appears to be related to the types of constraints they encounter. For example, people in poor health are less likely to overcome constraints than healthy people. Park and recreation managers have the opportunity to help people overcome the constraints they encounter.

For further information

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